Chapter 3

Harlem Tricksters: Cheating the Cycle of Trauma in the fiction of Ralph Ellison and Nella Larsen

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According to Carl Jung, 'in picaresque tales, in carnivals and revels, in magic rites of healing, in man's religious fears and exaltations, [the] phantom of the trickster haunts the mythology of all ages'.[1] Indigenous trickster figures across the globe share startling similarities. They can shape-shift, transcend gender boundaries and remove their body parts, and above all, they are the breakers of taboos and social norms. It is vital not to overlook the unique cultural context in which particular tricksters are embedded. Transported by slaves to the Americas, African trickster figures played a fundamental role during the plantation regime; Anansi the spider became central to the Caribbean storytelling tradition and Brer Rabbit gained popularity in North America, while Eshu was adopted by the religious practices of slaves, in particular Hoodoo in North America, Santeria in Cuba and Vodun in Haiti. Storytelling on plantations in the Americas was a communal activity, providing a cathartic release from the traumas of plantation life and ensuring the continuation of African oral traditions. The trickster also demonstrated ways in which slaves could thwart the plantation system using some of the few means available to them; their cunning, intelligence and linguistic wit. In North America, the Brer Rabbit trickster, the hero of plantation folktales, metamorphosed once more to become central to the African American literary tradition.

This chapter examines the twentieth-century African American literary manifestations of the Brer Rabbit trickster in the fiction of Nella Larsen (*Passing*, 1929) and Ralph Ellison (*Invisible Man*, 1952) through the lens of trauma theory. Both texts deal with Harlem during 1920s-1950s, a period of deeply coded racial stratification. I begin by briefly examining the postcoloniality of the texts in hand and considering the applicability of trauma theory to these novels. I then move on to explore the roots of the African American trickster, before analysing the ways in which Ellison and Larsen employ trickster figures and strategies to test and subvert imposed racial and social boundaries. I argue that, like the oral narratives exchanged during the plantation period, these trickster fictions embrace ambiguity, transformation and transcendence and, in doing so, offer their readers psychological methods to challenge racism and the traumatic legacies of slavery.

There has been much debate over the application of the term 'postcolonial' to African American writing. One could argue that, if postcolonial writing is writing produced by formally colonised nations after independence from colonial control, then all literature produced in North America after the War of Independence should be classed as postcolonial, which in turn raises questions about the position of Native American literature.[2] However, while African Americans were not colonised by European powers on American soil – and therefore do not historically fit the usual models of postcolonial experience – postcolonial issues of diaspora, exile, migration, rupture, nationhood and hybridity are nevertheless central to the African American literary tradition.[3] It is indeed a postcolonial perspective which underpins the work of many African American critics and authors who are dedicated to analysing the effects of colonialism, their position in relation to the colonial and postcolonial, and to unpicking concepts of American identity.[4]

The central tenets of postcolonial theory can help enrich our understanding and analysis of African American writing and, in turn, enliven postcolonial debate. The texts under examination in this chapter focus on what can be described as the pathology of the colonised; the fear, self-hatred and internalised racism which reverberate through a community alienated from and degraded by white society. Furthermore, African Americans today are in a unique position; to live in the United States is to live in a former colonial centre, but also in an economic superpower of the postcolonial world – yet many black American communities remain economically deprived and marginalised, existing on the peripheries of mainstream society. Is this not, as Christine MacLeod argues, a perfect site for a postcolonial analysis which deals with subjugation and margins?[5] The positioning of African American writers at both the socio-economic centre and peripheries is ripe for further analysis. If postcolonial theory centres on challenging totalities and dismantling fixed, authoritarian structures, the term must be flexible and malleable enough to encompass this body of writing. To integrate African American writing into the existing body of postcolonial work is to offer a medium through which black Americans can share and exchange their experiences and explorations within the postcolonial framework at a global level. This, in turn, facilitates rich comparative study, examining cross-cultural fertilisation in terms of resistance strategies and cultural forms from across and beyond the black diaspora.[6]

Another fruitful convergence of discourses, as exemplified in this edited collection, is the use of trauma theory as a tool for postcolonial literary analysis. While trauma theory has been increasingly employed as a theoretical framework for literary practice, its use by postcolonial critics is relatively new.[7] However, as Irene Visser highlights, there are serious problems regarding the Eurocentric roots of trauma theory that need to be addressed before its application

to postcolonial texts offers desirable results. Indeed, since the 1990s, trauma therapists, mental health professionals and aid workers in non-Western contexts have voiced concerns about using Western-based trauma models in their work due to their ethnocentric foundations in Holocaust research and Freudian theory.[8] As Stef Craps and Gert Buelens argue, Eurocentric structures and views which broaden the gap between the West and the rest of the world may actually be maintained and supported by trauma studies if trauma theory continues to ignore and marginalise non-Western traumatic events and histories.[9] Traditional models of trauma theory do not take into account alternative knowledge systems, coping mechanisms and methods of healing found in non-European cultures; akin to postcolonial theory, trauma theory needs to be revised to offer keener insights into global legacies of violence.[10] Visser, Craps and Buelens call for the numerous postcolonial critics now drawing on trauma theory to help move the discourse away from a focus on Holocaust issues and towards a more precise and comprehensive understanding of trauma in postcolonial countries. In doing so they must address the deficits in trauma theory which render it incompatible to an analysis of 'collective, prolonged and cumulative experiences of traumatisation' and examinations of issues of guilt, complicity and agency in the colonial and postcolonial context.[11] The texts under examination here embody the postcolonial themes of trauma, resistance, transcendence and transformation through the figure of the trickster.

Ellison and Larsen's trickster protagonists and narrators challenge reductive concepts of African American identity. Hybrid, complex and ambiguous characters, tricksters fail to comprehend or accept totalitarian social structures which attempt to bind them to an identity based on their race or social positioning. Both writer draws from the trickster archetype to address not only personal trauma but also historical traumas of slavery, segregation, migration, poverty and sexism in Harlem. During the 1920-1950s, Harlem was thought to be a beacon of

hope and freedom by African Americans across the United States. Despite the often disappointing reality, the promise of jobs and higher wages, of greater equality and the excitement of city life fuelled by the Harlem Renaissance, brought thousands of black Americans to the city. Ellison and Larsen capture the thrilling sense of opportunity offered by Harlem, as well as the limitations of the freedoms it offers. Where better to locate the trickster protagonist, symbolic of liberty and transformation, than in a city space glorified for its ability to facilitate transcendence and reinvention?

When examining the trickster archetype it is impossible to ignore Jung's contributions. While his analysis is often highly problematic and awash with Eurocentric, colonial prejudices and assumptions which hamper the credibility of his analysis, his work on the role of tricksters in indigenous cultures remains highly influential. The trickster, for Jung, is a universal archetype from the unconscious which is altered as it makes its way into the conscious mind through myth and symbol. He argues that trickster tales are able to liberate humankind from fixed structures; for Jung, they demonstrate the latent desire in humankind to escape social protocol. The trickster is a liminal, pre-social, pure and unhindered entity stripped of any commitment to the group – a powerful primal energy which falsifies the structures of the human world.[12] They change their identities to outmanoeuvre and overcome their opponents. In many African versions of slave trickster tales, the trickster is neither a deity nor from the human or animal world, but can harness the powers of both the gods and humankind.[13] They are creatures who inhabit a position on the margins from which they test and extend established boundaries. By appropriating the spirit of the trickster in literary form, trickster novels are able to scrutinise borderline identities, an ideal medium for examining the lives of people forced to live on the margins of society. As the embodiment of liminality, the trickster is a medium for transcending

the trauma of racism and prejudice. If, as Cathy Caruth argues, trauma is a mental wound, then the trickster offers the victim a form of healing.[14] Like the protagonists of *Invisible Man* and *Passing*, if one can 'elude or slip through the network of classifications', trauma will be unable to impose itself repeatedly.[15] The typical emotional reaction to a trauma – repression, guilt, repetition – may be transcended, as the victim refuses to adhere to emotional and social conventions.

Enslaved Africans from East, Central and South Africa brought the stories of the trickster Hare to the Americas, which, like so many trickster tales, depict a physically small and vulnerable creature using his cunning intelligence to prevail over larger animals. The Hare became known as Brother, or 'Brer' Rabbit on the plantations and became part of the American cultural mainstream through the work of the white American journalist Joel Chandler Harris, who wrote several collections of 'Uncle Remus' stories between 1870 and 1906. Harris' tales were told to him by African American plantation workers, and he has been both applauded for keeping the folktales alive and criticised heavily for contributing towards patronising black stereotypes; for plagiarism, and for defending slavery. In a speech delivered to the Atlanta Historical Society in 1981, for example, Alice Walker accused Harris of stealing part of her heritage and making her 'feel ashamed of it'.[16] Uncle Remus, a character of Harris' invention, is a type of 'Uncle Tom' figure, a kind and contented old slave who tells the Brer Rabbit stories for the amusement of a little white boy. Harris' versions of the tales are sanitised to entertain white readers; the exposé of the violence and injustice at the heart of plantation life found in tales collected by less biased collectors, such as those transcribed by African American folklorists from The Hampton Folklore Society (founded in 1893) [17] is tempered, and the stories offer a benign and picturesque view of slavery.

In several popular Brer Rabbit tales, Rabbit pits his wits against the dumb and lumbering Brer Bear. In the African American version of the famous 'Tar Baby' tale in *The Book of Negro Folklore* (1958), compiled by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, Brer Rabbit refuses to share the digging of a well with the other animals and then helps himself to all the water. The animals devise an ingenious scheme; they make a Tar Baby (a doll covered in sticky tar, which also plays a pivotal role several Caribbean Anansi stories) and leave it in Rabbit's path. When Rabbit sees the doll he thinks it is Brer Bear and speaks to it. Frustrated by the lack of response, he hits the Tar Baby several times until he is completely stuck. Thus ensnared, the animals meet to discuss how to kill him, but Rabbit, through his sly duplicity, verbal skills and cunning is returned safely to his maternal home. In the Uncle Remus version, predictably, Rabbit is not victor. While there is little doubt that Harris' Brer Rabbit is a character dislocated from his origins as an African and slave folk hero, the trickster figure which was appropriated by twentieth-century African American authors in an effort to transform the political and literary landscape, where fixed perceptions of social and racial boundaries dominated, abounds with the innovative energy and sly stratagems of the original African trickster.

In *Invisible Man*, the personal and historical trauma experienced by the text's protagonist initially interrupts the continuity of their lives and the narrative, repeating itself until trickster strategies allow them to transcend their trauma and break, or cheat, the cycle. Along with the tricksters Clare and Irene, the anti-heroines of *Passing*, these protagonists are morally dubious, yet refuse to feel guilt or allow their experiences to destroy them. If the roots of trauma are often located in the guilt of survival rather than the unbearable nature of the traumatic event or encounter, then the way of the trickster, the master of survival at all costs, can liberate one from the cycle of remorse.[18]

Ellison's Invisible Man is plagued by trickster figures until he learns, through his traumatic experiences, enough about trickster strategies to outmaneuver his opponents. Like Brer Rabbit, he learns to be creative, to 'dodge traps' and 'see around corners', resulting in an awareness of the weaknesses of those who seek to manipulate or destroy him.[19] The narrator calls himself the Invisible Man as people refuse to see him, and begins his account of his journey towards an ambiguous 'awakening' by describing himself as the easily fooled Brer Bear, hiding from the world in a den underground: 'Call me Jack-the-Bear, for I am in a state of hibernation'.[20] The psychological journey he must undertake to understand and adopt some of the strategies used by Brer Rabbit – quick-witted, devoid of guilt, and a master of oratory – is arduous**.** He is forced by a series of trickster figures to continually reassess his identity and wear several different masks as he performs the role of obsequious student, clueless dupe, black revolutionary, Marxist orator, pimp and playboy.

In 'Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke' (1958) Ellison discusses his indebtedness to the folk tradition and the trickster archetype in *Invisible Man* whilst warning critics not to oversimplify their analyses of his work. This essay is a response to his 'old friend and sparring partner' Stanley Edgar Hyman, who identified several trickster figures in Ellison's text.[21] Ellison expresses his frustration that his work pigeon-holed. Alongside that of so many black writers during the period, he argues that it is continually examined by critics through the lens of the black American folk tradition. He accuses Hyman and others of generalisation in their analysis of trickster archetypes and of playing a 'critical game' of 'archetype hunting' which ignores the specifics of literary works; 'from a proper distance *all* archetypes would appear to be tricksters', Ellison states.[22] He goes to great lengths to emphasise his *dual* literary heritage and points out

that in he is as much indebted to the African American folk tradition as he is to modernists Eliot and Joyce:

> I use folklore in my work not because I am a Negro, but because writers like Eliot and Joyce made me conscious of the literary value of my folk inheritance […]. I knew the trickster of *Ulysses* just as early as I knew the wily rabbit of Negro American lore, and I could easily imagine myself a pint-sized Ulysses but hardly a rabbit, no matter how human or resourceful or Negro.[23]

Ellison highlights the universality of the trickster figure; trickster figures of ancient Greek and Roman origin such as Hermes, Mercurius, and Ulysses himself have long fascinated and inspired European writers, and Ellison adds depth and complexity to the trickster narrative genre by drawing from his European, black and white American literary heritage. Indeed, Ellison stresses that masking and trickterism are not just African American strategies, but that the whole of America is a 'land of masking jokers': 'We wear masks for the purposes of aggression and defence, when we are projecting the future and preserving the past. In short, the motives behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals'.[24] In *Invisible Man* the narrator's 'awakening' is only possible as he becomes 'conscious of his own victimisation', which in turn enables him to step out from behind his masks.[25] Initially, he is haunted by his mild-mannered grandfather's last words, a complex and confusing riddle or 'deathbed curse' which outlines how he should respond to the dominant white community: 'Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open' (p. 17).

Rather than encouraging submissiveness to whites, at the heart of this riddle is a trickster's survival strategy; remain duplicitous and stay in open combat with your oppressors while making them believe they have the upper hand. Ellison states that the grandfather is not a 'smart-man-playing-dumb' but a 'weak man who knows the nature of his oppressor's weakness', whose 'mask of meekness conceals the wisdom of one who has learned the secret if saying "yes" which accomplished the expressive "no"'.[26]

Whilst at college the still innocent Invisible Man stumbles upon the trickster figure Jim Trueblood. At the end of the Invisible Man's academic year he drives the white millionaire founder of his college, Mr. Norton, around the campus and surrounding countryside. He unwittingly takes Mr. Norton to a huddle of shacks, where they are met the by the poor black sharecropper Trueblood who tells them a terrible story of incest. Trueblood explains to Mr. Norton, who appears mesmerised by his tale, how he slept with his daughter while dreaming. Although the college students condemn Trueblood's actions, he is assisted financially by the white community, who pay him a great deal of attention. Mr. Norton is drawn to the tale partly because it taps into his own incestuous desires towards his daughter, and partly because it confirms his own, and the white community's, racial prejudices concerning the sexual behaviour and morality of poor African Americans.

The Trueblood episode serves to highlight Mr. Norton's own trickery, dismantling his performance of philanthropy and revealing his patronising racial prejudices, which in turn demonstrates the unstable and problematic ideological foundations on which the Invisible Man's college are built. Trueblood is a skilful Bluesman and a master storyteller: 'He cleared his throat, his eyes gleaming and his voice taking on a deep, incantatory quality, as though he had told the story many, many times' (p. 48). After his story, Norton gives him a hundred dollar bill to buy

toys for his children. Houston A. Baker, Jr. argues that Trueblood is a trickster who employs his story as a marketable product, using his trickster's storytelling gift to sell to Mr. Norton and other whites the narrative they long to hear; one that justifies their racism. He thus not only evades punishment, but is rewarded for his transgressions; in the wake of the incident he tells his audience: 'We ain't doing so bad, suh. 'Fore they heard 'bout what happen to us out here I couldn't get no help from nobody. Now lotta folks is curious and goes outta they way to help' (p. 47).[27] As Baker explains, 'Trueblood's sexual energies, antinomian acts, productive issue, and resonant expressivity make him – in his incestuous, liminal moments and their immediate aftermath – the quintessential trickster'.[28] Morally objectionable, self-interested, shameless and a performer of sycophancy, Trueblood is perhaps the most destructive and dangerous type of trickster. He not only breaks society's greatest taboo, but uses the story of his transgression for self-gain.

Dr Bledstow, the black president of the narrator's college, is also a master of deception. Hell-bent on survival, Bledstow is willing to deceive his people and pander to the expectations of whites to remain in power, claiming he would rather witness the lynching of every black man in America rather than lose his position. He is baffled by the narrator's honesty, and tells him; 'why, the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie!' (p. 116). With this reference to Brer Rabbit's cotton patch Ellison invites us to draw clear parallels between Bledstow and Brer Rabbit's trickery and deceit, as well as damming the trickster's attitude of survival at all costs.

On his arrival in Harlem the narrator meets Peter Wheatstraw, possibly named after Potter's Peter Rabbit, and described as the 'Devil's only son-in-law' (p. 194), who advises the Invisible Man to reclaim his 'roots' as an orator and learn to play the trickster. He warns him:

‘man, this Harlem ain’t nothing but a bear’s den’ (p. 143). The Invisible Man responds: ‘I tried to think of some saying about bears to reply, but remembered only Jack the Rabbit, Jack the Bear’ (p. 143). Peter tells him: ‘All it takes to get along in this here man’s town is a little shit, grit and mother-wit. And man, I was bawn with all three’ (p. 144). At this point in the narrative, Peter highlights the narrator’s innocence, and the distance he must travel to achieve ‘mother-wit’ and gain an awareness of his historical roots and oppressor’s tricks.

Lucias Brockway, who plays the role of both trickster Rabbit and ‘Tar Baby’, also helps the narrator on his path towards his awakening. Lucias is a paint factory worker, obsequious to whites and fearful that the unions are after his job, he is a threat to the solidarity and struggle of poor workers and blacks alike. He is similar to Brer Rabbit in appearance and is described as ‘small, wiry’ with ‘cottony white hair’ and ‘shrewd, reddish eyes’ (pp. 169, 170). He has a ‘heavy engineer’s watch’ in his breast pocket which he regularly pulls out and squints at (much like Lewis Carroll’s March hare) and, when he comes to blows with the narrator, he bites him viciously with his sharp rabbit-like teeth. However, like the Tar Baby, Lucias’ sticky and grimy overalls look, to the Invisible Man, as if they have been ‘dipped in pitch’ (p. 169). The narrator observes that ‘Great tucks showed in his overalls where the folds were stuck together by the goo with which he was covered, and I thought, Tar Baby, and wanted to blot him out of my sight’ (p. 185). It is his encounter with Brockway which leads to an explosion in the paint factory and the narrator’s subsequent hospitalisation. Identified by the narrator as the Tar Baby, a character who has become synonymous with a situation best avoided, Lucias Brockway is nothing but bad news.

As he recovers consciousness in hospital, the narrator appears to have forgotten his identity. A card is held out to him by the doctors asking his name; when he fails to answer, other

question cards are offered, including one which asks: 'WHO WAS BUCKEYE THE RABBIT?' (p 197). The narrator responds: 'I laughed deep, deep inside me, giddy with the delight of self-discovery and the desire to hide it. Somehow *I* was Buckeye the Rabbit [...]. It was annoying that he had hit upon an old identity' (p. 197). When the narrator is discharged, he feels that he is in the grip of an 'alien personality', but simultaneously realises that he is devoid of fear and cannot be intimidated by his opponents. He has become Brer Rabbit, his innocence lost, and he believes that, to survive in Harlem, he must become the trickster rather than the Bear. Yet this transformation is short-lived, demonstrated when he finally comes face-to-face with the powerful Jack, the communist leader, alias 'buckeye', another name for Brer Rabbit, who moves like Brer Rabbit 'across the floor with a bouncy, rolling step', and who wants a Brer Bear to trick into helping him conduct a destructive master plan to the detriment of the black community in Harlem (p. 234).

Once he becomes aware of Jack's tricks, the Invisible Man metamorphosises once more. As he walks through Harlem wearing dark sunglasses, people mistake him for a man named B. P. Rhinehart, a person of multiple identities, from pimp to Reverend, whom we never meet. Through wearing the many guises of the shape-shifter, he becomes aware of the fragility and fluidity of his own identity. Indeed, Ellison states that the B. (for bliss) P. (for Proteus) Rhinehart is a perfect example of the trickster figure. While Ellison pokes fun at the 'critical game' of 'dissolving' fiction into 'anthropology', he describes B. P. Rhinehart as an 'American virtuoso of identity who thrives on chaos and swift change' (p. 110). He is greedy (motivated by money and the 'sheer bliss' of impersonation), god-like, phallic and a miracle-worker. Ellison explains that Rhinehart's function in the narrative is to allow the narrator to apply once again his grandfather's cryptic riddle and advice to his own situation (p. 110).

In ‘Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke’ Ellison interprets jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong, with his clownish performance and ‘intoxicating powers’, his mockery of authoritative figures (‘he takes liberties with kings and queens and presidents’) and his ability to ‘perform the magical feat of making romantic melody issue from a throat of gravel’ as the trickster personified.[29] Interestingly, while Ellison downplays the influence of African American trickster narratives on his novel, Louis’ Blues song, ‘What did I do to be so Black and Blue’, is central to the narrator’s developing sense of self-awareness and frames both prologue and epilogue. In short, Louis’ trickster Blues performance demonstrates to the Invisible Man the possibility of making music out of invisibility.

In novel’s epilogue the narrator decides to come out of his hibernation, ‘since there’s a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play’ (p. 468). The narrator will resurface after a profound awakening and turn his trauma into art through sharing his story; ‘could this compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white be thus an urge to make music of invisibility’ (p. 16). The novel ends by addressing the reader and the African American community: ‘Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?’ (p. 469). By being tested by the trickster, the narrator has been able to come to terms with the instability of his identity and, like the trickster tale, taken the listener on a journey towards self-awareness.

Nella Larsen’s novella *Passing* also depicts the use of trickster techniques as strategies for overcoming trauma. The narrative charts the rekindling of a tense friendship between two middle-class light-skinned African American women, Irene (who has married a black man and lives a comfortable domestic life in Harlem with her husband Brian and two sons) and Clare (who has completely ‘passed’ into the white world and married the affluent white racist John

Bellew). Through her manipulation of Irene's attraction to her, Clare is initially cast as the trickster figure who lures Irene into a quagmire of emotional and sexual entanglement, yet we soon discover that both Clare and Irene employ the trickster's ruthless survival strategies; through masking and shape-shifting they perform a variety of inauthentic and deceitful roles. The novella's narrative voice is also replete with trickster strategies; although Irene's perspective dominates the majority of the story, an omniscient narrator interjects and reveals Irene's self-delusions. While we are continually party to Irene's self-questioning interior monologue; 'Couldn't [Brian] see, even now, that it *had* been best for him?',[30] 'Where was all the self-control, the common sense, that she was so proud of?' (p. 232), 'Was it that she lacked the capacity for the acme of suffering?' (p. 235), an omniscient narrative voice interjects to offer the reader insights into Irene motivations that she herself cannot know. We are told she never 'acknowledges' how much she wants to control her husband Brian or will '*admit* that all other plans, all other ways, she regarded as menaces' [my emphasis] (p. 190). Yet this insight – that Irene does not acknowledge or admit her motives – is not extended to Clare. She is denied a narrative voice and viewed through the lens of Irene – we can only know what Irene tells us.

The act of racial passing is depicted by Larsen as a trickster's art, and while Larsen's novel might seem to conform to the typical 'Tragic Mulatto' narrative, a popular genre in twentieth-century American literature and film which centres on titillating racial boundary crossing, resulting in tragic consequences, she in fact both challenges and transforms it. Larsen's characters are hard and ambiguous, and invite little sympathy from the reader. It seems that Larsen cannily ensured the popularity of her most famous novellas *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* by borrowing from a popular and recognisable genre, while turning it on its head. A far

cry from tragic victims, Irene and Clare (alongside Helga from *Quicksand*) are vain, grasping, insensitive and controlling; character traits which eventually do lead to their downfall.

With connotations of masking and masquerade, death and liminality (passing from one state into another), 'passing' can offer great freedom. Indeed, those who passed across the 'colour line' in early twentieth-century America existed on the borderlands, threatening discourses of power. In the words of Victor Turner, they were 'threshold people', slipping through networks of classifications 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial'.[31] As a young woman, Clare suffers the trauma of neglect at the hands of her drunken and abusive father and her racist white aunts, who take pleasure in making her work hard, yet she resists victimisation through the use of a repertoire of trickster strategies which allow her to reinvent herself, outmanoeuvre her opponents and transcend poverty. In a conversation with Irene she admits that she is dangerous, and reveals her lack of moral code. Her sudden rush of honesty makes Irene, who is acutely aware of the insincerity of their performance of renewed friendship, feel 'uncomfortable':

> 'It's just that I haven't any proper morals or sense of duty, as you have, that makes me act as I do.'
>
> 'Now you are talking nonsense.'
>
> 'But it's true, 'Rene. Can't you realize that I'm not like you a bit? Why, to get things I want badly enough, I'd do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away. Really, 'Rene, I'm not safe.' Her voice as well as the look on her face had a beseeching earnestness that made Irene vaguely uncomfortable. (p. 210)

Irene's well-ordered life in Harlem is immediately under threat when she meets Clare at the upmarket Drayton Hotel, after many years of little contact, where they are both 'passing' as white women to enjoy the luxurious and elite surroundings. Clare (who is anything but clear, as her name suggests, but seemingly full of murky ambitions) uses her trickster qualities – her sexuality and linguistic gifts – to entice Irene. Clare can harness the power of words to lure, both in her persuasive letters to Irene and in her conversations. She is manipulative and intuitive; she 'always seemed to know what other people were thinking' (p. 234) and is described as 'selfish, willful, and disturbing' (p. 202), and as possessing a 'having way' about her (p. 153). Yet Clare also plays the role of Tar Baby; indeed, she is twice described as having been 'touched by the tar brush', a racially pejorative term for those of mixed heritage which become synonymous with the Tar Baby figure.[32] Not only is she problematically racially aligned to the Tar Baby, but also like the Tar Baby, she unmasks Irene, exposing *her* as the real trickster, capable of terrible destruction. The more Irene tries to resist Clare, the more entangled she becomes in Clare's life. In the traditional folktale, Brer Rabbit abuses the Tar Baby both physically and verbally, yet he is ultimately furious with an inanimate object which holds a mirror to his wrath and reflects it back at him. The alluring Tar Baby Clare is also a conduit for Irene self-destruction, as Irene becomes disempowered, trapped and unmasked by her own possessive rage and destructive pride.

While Irene passes across the colour line infrequently to gain access to certain white-only public spaces like the Drayton, Clare has permanently crossed over into white society, and her mixed racial origins remain a dangerous secret. Her reunion with Irene, however, awakens in her a longing for a return to the black community. Despite her condemnation of Clare's choices, Clare's ability to recreate herself as a white woman and pass permanently seems thrilling to Irene, and in turn ignites in her a desire to break free from social and racial restraints.

The lives of both women are depicted by Larsen as dominated by an endless and grueling round of social gatherings and events where they must play the roles of charming, gentile and sophisticated women. Yet, while Clare does not appear to be bound by any sense of loyalty to her black heritage and enjoys breaking social codes, Irene feels the need to be viewed as an upstanding member of her middle-class black community who is keen to 'protect' her race. We begin to see Irene's carefully managed performance unravel as the similarity between the two women is revealed; the disturbing presence of Clare in Irene's life threatens to unmask her and unleash her repressed sexual and violent desires. The narrator tells us: 'above everything else she had wanted, had striven, to keep undisturbed the pleasant routine of her life. And now Clare Kendry had come into it, and with her the menace of impermanence' (p. 229). Clare thwarts fixity; she is a threat to Irene and her apparent need for a settled and regimented existence. Clare seems to shape-shift to frustrate her opponents and transform her appearance to gain the upper hand. Like the Invisible Man, she can assume multiple identities, and dresses to disarm, flaunting her unique beauty and refusing to wear anything 'ordinary and inconspicuous' in order (according to Irene) to titillate or to make Irene feel 'dowdy' (p. 203). Her personality, too, is described as changeable:

> Sometimes she was hard and apparently without feeling at all; sometimes she was affectionate and rashly impulsive. And there was about her an amazing soft malice, hidden well away until provoked. Then she was capable of scratching, and very effectively too. (p. 145)

These multiple identities allow Clare to manipulate the people around her; she varies her performances and appearance according to her situation. Just as the trickster often entices his victims through putting his sexual gifts on display, Clare flirts with Irene and persistently draws her attention to her loveliness. She oozes sexuality: 'Clare had a *trick* of sliding down ivory lids over astonishing black eyes and then lifting them suddenly and turning on a caressing smile' [my emphasis] (p. 221). 'Always stepping on the edge of danger', Clare revels in subtly inappropriate behavior – her smile is 'just a shade too provocative for a waiter' (p. 152).

Clare is successful in using her sexuality as bait; she clearly arouses in Irene a deeply physical longing. Deborah McDowell and Judith Butler both examine the homosexual subtext of *Passing*, and McDowell argues that the real story is about 'Irene's awakening of sexual desire for Clare'.[33] Irene's continual focus on the beautiful details of Clare's clothes, skin, mesmerising lips and hair leave the reader with little doubt of her attraction, and Clare implements her sexual power to manipulate and confuse Irene; 'Dear God!,' exclaims Irene after Clare kisses her hair, 'But aren't you lovely. Clare!' (p. 194).

The Harlem ball, a yearly event during which both whites and blacks socialise and dance together, is an event which Clare, who enjoys the racial borderlands, refuses to miss despite the risk it entails. Clare, a 'blond beauty', chooses a handsome and particularly 'dark' man to dance with, which causes, according to Irene, 'a kind of emotional excitement' in onlookers (p. 205). Irene describes the attraction between the dance partners; 'the sort of things you feel in the presence of something strange, and even, perhaps, a bit repugnant to you; something so different that it's really at the opposite end of the pole from all your accustomed notions of beauty' (p. 205). The light-skinned Clare deliberately chooses a very dark partner to once again thwart

convention, insisting on pushing back the boundaries of acceptability and reveling in the excitement of the testing of racial taboos.

While Irene highlights instances of Clare's cruelty, Larsen offers the reader a glimpse of Irene's callousness and strong survival instinct in the story's opening pages. The pristine Irene finds herself surrounded by a crowd of people after a man collapses in front of her. Simultaneously foreshadowing her entrapment by the wiles of sultry Tar Baby Clare and highlighting her sexual repression, Irene is immediately repulsed by the bodily contact of a damp, sticky soiled and sweating crowd, and demonstrates a clear lack of human compassion: 'She edged her way out of the increasing crowd, feeling disagreeably damp and sticky and soiled from contact with so many sweating bodies' (p. 147).

As the novella progresses, Larsen's narrative trick becomes clear and Clare and Irene become increasingly interchangeable. Terrified by the havoc created by Clare's presence in her life, and deeply fearful that she is having an affair with her husband (perhaps as a result of her displaced sexual attraction for Clare), Irene fantasies about Clare's death, offering another indication of the real woman behind the mask of gentility: 'If Clare should die! Then – oh it was vile! To think, yes, to wish that! She felt faint and sick. But the thought stayed with her. She could not get rid of it' (p. 228).

In an ambiguous and gruesome finale, Clare 'passes' one last time. Her husband Bellew tracks her down and confronts her at party in a sixth-floor apartment in the black community in Harlem. Suddenly, Clare plunges to her death from the window, leaving the reader unsure if she has been pushed by Irene or Bellew, or has jumped: 'One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone' (p. 239). While story ends by hinting at variety of possible conclusions, Larsen strongly suggests that Clare was pushed by

Irene: 'Irene wasn't sorry. She was amazed, incredulous almost' (p. 239). Irene carefully plots her response to questioners and worries that people may have seen her hand on Clare's arm; she wishes he had thought of the aftermath in 'that sudden moment of action' (p. 239). Irene is thus exposed to the reader as the ultimate trickster who has failed in her attempt to 'pass' as a kind and loving mother, wife, friend and respectable member of the Harlem community.

This chapter has mapped the Invisible Man's awakening and the recovery of his identity through challenges by trickster figures, and demonstrated that 'passing' is a trickster's art in Larsen's novella. Ellison argued that fiction and poetry could rarely possess the same immediacy and power as folklore because folklore tells us 'what Negro experience really is'.[34] Yet by drawing from trickster folklore, Ellison and Larsen not only successfully counter reductive representations of African American identity through the creation of nuanced and complex trickster figures, but implement trickster narrative strategies to experiment with the construction of meaning and directly challenge traditional Western novelistic forms. In doing so they reclaim the Brer Rabbit narratives from the hands of Joel Chandler Harris and return them to their 'briar patch' as celebrations of the multiplicity of identities African Americans were forced to adopt in early twentieth-century Harlem.

As a response to the historical trauma of slavery and racism, the trickster novel also fulfils the need for a witness, an audience who will listen and recognise trauma – and go some way towards rendering it knowable. But above all, as symbols of chaos and freedom, tricksters are expressions of the innate human desire to thwart societal rules and overturn oppressive regimes. Creatures of the threshold, they revel in their ambiguous identities on the borderlands of cultural space. It is through imbuing their characters and narratives with trickster qualities

that these authors offer their readers, and themselves, a psychological release from the traumatic legacy of a regime rooted in a ridged, racist social hierarchy.

Notes

[1] Carl Jung, *Four Archetypes: Mother Rebirth Spirit Trickster* (London: Routledge, 1972), p. 140.

[2] Deborah Madsen, *Beyond the Borders: American Literature and Post-Colonial Theory* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), p.1.

[3] Christine MacLeod, 'Black American Literature and the Postcolonial Debate', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 27 (1997), 51-65 (p. 58).

[4] Madsen, p. 2.

[5] MacLeod, p. 58.

[6] Ibid., p. 58.

[7] Irene Visser,'Trauma theory and Postcolonial Literary Studies', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 47: 3 (2011), 270-82 (p. 270).

[8] Visser, p. 272, and Steph Craps and Gert Buelens,'Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels', *Studies in the Novel*, 40 (2008) 1-12 (p. 2).

[9] Craps and Buelens, p. 2.

[10] Visser, pp. 272, 279.

[11] Visser, p. 280; Craps and Buelens, pp. 1-12.

[12] See Jung.

[13] See Robert S. Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti Folk-Tales* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930) and Emily Zobel Marshall, 'Anansi, Eshu, and Legba: Slave Resistance and the West African Trickster', in *Bonded Labour in the Cultural Contact Zone: Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Slavery and Its Discourses*, ed. by Raphael Hoermann and Gesa Mackenthun (Münster: Waxmann, 2010), pp. 171-92.

[14] Cathy Caruth, ed., *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 3. Caruth refers here to Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920).

[15] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1995), p. 95.

[16] Alice Walker states: 'As far as I'm concerned, he stole a good part of my heritage. How did he steal it? By making me feel ashamed of it. In creating Uncle Remus, he placed an effective barrier between me and the stories that meant so much to me, the stories that could have meant so much to all of our children, the stories that they would have heard from us and not from Walt Disney'. For a print version see Alice Walker, 'The Dummy in the Window: Joel Chandler Harris and the Invention of Uncle Remus', *Living by the Word: Selected Writings, 1975-1987.* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), p.32.

[17] Shirley Moody-Turner, *Black Folklore and the Politics of Racial Representation* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2013).

[18] See also Visser.

[19] Floyd R. Horowitz, 'Ralph Ellison's Modern Version of Brer Bear and Brer Rabbit in *Invisible Man*', *Midcontinent American Studies Journal*, 4:2 (1963), 21-27.

[20] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 9. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

[21] Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 100.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., p. 121.

[24]Ibid., p. 109.

[25] Horowitz, p. 247.

[26] Ellison, *Shadow*, p.110.

[27] Houston A. Baker, Jr., "To Move without Moving": An Analysis of Creativity and Commerce in Ralph Ellison's Trueblood Episode,' *PMLA*, 98: 5 (1983), 828-45.

[28] Baker, p. 835.

[29] Ellison, 'Change', pp. 106-07.

[30] Nella Larsen, *Quicksand and Passing* (London: Serpents Tail, 2001), p. 186. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

[31] Turner, p. 95.

[32] Clare's aunts can't bear to acknowledge that their brother had impregnated a 'Negro' girl and had a mixed-race child; 'they couldn't forgive the tar-brush' (p.159). The racial slur 'touched by the tar brush' does not originate from African American folklore, but since the late eightieth century has become associated with mixed-race people (see Christopher Peterson, *Bestial Traces: Race, Sexuality, Animality: Race, Sexuality, Animality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), p.58.

[33] Deborah McDowell, ed. Introduction to Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* and *Passing*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers

University Press, 1986), pp. ix–xxxi (p.xxvi).
See also Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993).

[34] Steve Cannon, Lennox Raphael and James Thompson, 'A Very Stern Discipline: An Interview with Ralph Ellison' (1967), *Conversations With Ralph Ellison*, ed. by Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 109-35 (p. 115).